

been the world's first great communicator. Whoever it was certainly lived a long time ago. Even though the seven stars look nothing like a bear, writes Bradley E. Schaefer, a Louisiana State University physicist and astronomer, that's what they were called by long-ago people as dispersed as the Greeks and the Zuni, the Basques and the Hebrews, the Cherokee and the Siberians. All knew versions of the myth of the Great Bear, that the four stars in the bowl of the dipper represent the bear, perpetually being chased by the three stars in the handle, representing hunters. It is virtually impossible that cultures in so many parts of the world would have thought up the story independently, Schaefer says. That means the Great Bear was named at least 14,000 years ago, when there was a land bridge across the Bering Strait that

allowed some ancient group to carry the idea to the Americas.

Constellations are among humankind's earliest creations and can be more revealing in some ways than the pottery and tools



The myth of the Great Bear constellation—seven stars on the hindquarters and tail—traveled across the Bering Strait with ancient migrants.

unearthed by archaeologists, offering a glimpse of what ancient people considered important enough to note in the sky. Through a process called precession, they can even help in dating art and clay or stone tablets. Because the earth wobbles on its axis, the positions of the stars change over the

centuries. The positions of the constellations described in ancient poems or depicted in art has been used to date such artifacts to within about 80 years of their creation.

The oldest known constellations are all named for gods, animals, and farm implements. The sequence of titles changes over time, Schaefer says, moving from religious to folk to practical to scientific. The Great Bear constellation may have been grown out of early religious practice. European cave paintings, artifacts, and ensembles of

cave bear skulls date to more than 30,000 years ago and suggest some kind of bear worship. The constellation may have been a folk depiction of an image used by ancient priests or medicine men. Schaefer believes that the Great Bear is quite likely one of humanity's oldest inventions.

ARTS & LETTERS

Mozart Meets Dylan

THE SOURCE: "Laissez-Faire Aesthetics: What Money Is Doing to Art, or How the Art World Lost Its Mind" by Jed Perl in *The New Republic*, Feb. 5, 2007.

THE MORGAN LIBRARY AND Museum in New York, newly luxurious after a renovation by the famous

architect Renzo Piano, simultaneously featured the following treasures this season: medieval illuminated manuscripts and metalwork, a group of drawings by Fragonard and other artists of the 18th century, a show of Mozart manuscripts, and Bob Dylan's American Journey:

1956–1966. If this were an SAT test, the question would be obvious: Which one of these does not belong? But even to raise the question is to invoke the wrath of the intellectual hipsters, writes Jed Perl, *The New Republic's* art critic.

Amid the gold-rush atmosphere of the current art world, a strange philosophy has emerged: laissez-faire aesthetics, he says. Laissez-faire aesthetes have come to believe that any experience that anyone can have with a work of art is equal to

any other. An artist such as the enormously successful John Currin can proclaim that his art is directly descended from Cranach the Elder and a raunchy comic in the *Mad* magazine tradition. “Transcendence and stupidity, formal perfection and kitsch: It’s all just part of the same big expensive banquet,” Perl observes.

Whatever floats your boat.

Of course, nobody woke up last fall to be shocked to see fast money thrown at flash-in-the-pan art. The what-the-heck attitude of the moment has its roots in the early 1960s. But the difference between garbage then and garbage now is that works of pop art and other “bad paintings” were ironic. “They depended on the existence of a standard that was being mocked,” Perl says. Laissez-faire painting mocks nothing; irony is too much of an idea for it.

A case in point is this season’s star, Lisa Yuskavage, whose “lesbo-bimbo” figure paintings of comically endowed nude women recall Jessica Rabbit in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. They seem like a joke—only they aren’t.

Forty years ago, the “evil prophet of the profit motive” was Andy Warhol, according to Perl. Warhol launched the trend toward laissez-faire taste that is currently embodied by an artist who does collages incorporating his own semen. A business model has come to drive the art world, Perl says, and the arts community must anoint a new artist to top Warhol, to trump the

EXCERPT

The Dead Letter

Cell phones and e-mail have taken the correspondence process one step closer to extinction. Time zones melt. Gone are the leisurely pace, the ruminative voice, the intervening hiatus, the long-anticipated answer.

—JUDITH KITCHEN, writer, poet, and teacher, in *The Georgia Review* (Fall–Winter, 2006)

latest show at the Modern every season, no matter what.

In mixing medieval manuscripts and Bob Dylan, the Morgan curators fail to recognize that high culture and popular culture are so wonderfully different that they cannot be put together, Perl writes. “Laissez-faire aesthetics is the aesthetics that violates the very principle of art, because it insists that anything goes when in fact the only thing that is truly unacceptable in the visual arts is the idea that anything goes.”

ARTS & LETTERS

Manet’s Snapshots

THE SOURCE: “The Lost Photographs of Edouard Manet” by Alexi Worth, in *Art in America*, Jan. 2007.

EDOUARD MANET (1832–83), arguably the greatest painter of his era, left behind paintings with some odd elements: In his 1864 *The Dead Christ and the Angels*, for example, the dazzling light on

Christ’s figure shines upward from near the painter’s feet, illuminating the legs and torso and leaving the Savior’s head and shoulders in near darkness. It’s hard to imagine a natural source of such illumination. Alexi Worth, a painter and writer based in Brooklyn, wonders whether Manet’s paintings may be based on photographs.

It’s commonplace for painters to make use of photographs today, but when Manet was working in the early 1860s, it was scandalous. Painters were being “outed” for relying on the crutch of the camera. Little wonder, then, that no photographs have been found among Manet’s papers. Nonetheless, the new technology was sweeping Europe. One of Manet’s closest friends was Nadar (1820–1910), among the first photographers to experiment with artificial light. Bright light looks ordinary to the modern eye, but in the 19th century it was startling. The few artificial sources of bright light available, such as arc lamps, were highly volatile, erratic, and dangerous. The intense light certainly could not have been sustained while a painter laboriously worked from live models.

Manet illuminated *The Dead Christ* with the bright, flat light of the amateur photographer, according to art historian Beatrice Farwell. In another painting, his 1865 *The Mocking of Christ*, art